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New Life for Watauga County

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New Life for Watauga County

"A place where people are born, then leave, and later return to die."

That's the way a citizen of Watauga County, North Carolina once described his home county.

There *was* more than a grain of truth in that statement.

Until recently, Watauga was a poor county. In 1949, the median income of its families was only \$1,063 a year—far below most other residents of the Tar Heel State. It ranked 97th among North Carolina's 100 counties.

The reason: serious unemployment and under-employment because of (1) a shortage of industry, and (2) the small size and rough terrain of the mountainside farms.

Because of the limited economic opportunities, Watauga County was losing the resources it could least afford to lose. Its young people—especially high school graduates—were leaving the county like fans deserting a losing team.

What's Been Done?

Things have changed dramatically—for the better—in the past five years. Look what the citizens of Watauga have accomplished in that time. They have—

- Constructed and leased out a new, modern lingerie plant which employs about 250 people and adds \$500,000 a year to the county's payroll.
- Built a new 18-hole golf course—a breathtaking beauty on top of a mountain—to attract and hold tourists.
- Increased agricultural income by more than \$1½ million a year.
- Cut down markedly on the out-migration of their young people.

What's responsible for the change? Watauga folks give much of the credit to a rural improve-

ment program that was started as an experiment in helping underdeveloped areas develop their resources. It was launched recently on an expanded and intensified nationwide scale as the Rural Areas Development program.

Watauga got its big break when it was elected as one of three North Carolina counties to serve as "guinea pigs." Enthusiastic citizens met and voted unanimously to take advantage of the helping hand offered by the program—with everybody working together to help themselves.

They named Alfred T. Adams, prominent banker in Boone, chairman of the executive committee. This committee thoroughly analyzed the needs of the county, made an inventory of resources, set goals, and began deciding the best ways to reach those goals.

Problems were broken down into bite-size chunks and separate committees were set up to deal with each problem. Committees included: business and industry; health, education, and welfare; agriculture; homemaking; and religion.

Only people highly interested in developing the county and "willing to work" were nominated for these jobs.

Chairman Adams was also impressed with the way everyone "pitched in." Various U.S. Department of Agriculture agencies and virtually all the clubs and organizations in the county went all out to make the program click.

Industrial Development

Watauga badly needed more industry offering seasonal, part-time and full-time employment.

G. R. Andrews, Boone automobile dealer, and his business and industrial committee set out to make Watauga more attractive to industries by: (1) compiling information showing the area's natural and human resources, and (2) creating a development corporation to sell stock and buy sites, erect buildings, and beat the bushes for prospective industrialists.

The corporation, called Watauga Industries, Inc., sold stock to local people at \$100 a share and soon had enough money to buy land and build a plant. They secured a new lingerie factory which began on a modest scale with 100 employees. It has been enlarged twice—each time with local people footing the bill—and now employs 250.



PLANNING CAME FIRST



NEW POULTRY BUSINESS

Portrait of a County Revived



TRADING POST



SMALL INDUSTRY



HOME CRAFTS



OUTDOOR THEATER



NEW GOLF COURSE

Citizens are justly proud of their factory. They've invested almost \$200,000 in the plant and land and have paid the debt down to \$17,000.

The industrial committee has also encouraged small industries. One is Johnny Council's small woodworking plant which employs around 25 people. Council got the idea after sitting in on a meeting of the industrial committee.

Although the employment situation has eased, the committee is still disturbed by the lack of jobs for men, as shown by a 1960 labor survey. Women do better on the delicate kind of workmanship required at the lingerie factory. The industrial committee is now trying to locate a company that will employ more men. They've already taken an option on 10 acres of prime industrial land.

A Growing Resort Income

Watauga folks have known all along that they had a good thing in their wonderful climate and beautiful scenery. About a million tourists pass through the area each year, but the county wasn't holding them long enough. With the rural improvement program as an impetus, Watauga has launched an all-out campaign to become a genuine resort center.

One result is the new golf course financed by the sale of stock. It is laid out on 260 scenic acres of gently rolling green land laced with streams. Boone Mayor Wade E. Brown thinks this golf course will entice tourists to stay longer—and spend more money while they're there.

Plans for developing Watauga as a resort area include: botanical gardens; a log cabin trading post to be used as a clearing house for local handicrafts; and a city recreational building to serve the entire area and to be used as a site for small conventions.

Since Watauga already boasts "Horn in the West," Kermit Hunter's outdoor drama now in its 10th year; and a popular narrow-gauge railroad, "Tweetsie Railroad," it looks as if the area will have quite a few things to "hold them awhile."

Agricultural Changes

Although perhaps not as dramatic as a new industry or golf course, the development of agriculture in Watauga County has been just as important in its own right.

County Agent L. E. Tuckwiller explains that Watauga farmers were fighting a losing battle with their small, hilly farms. The agriculture committee encouraged them to grow poultry and small fruits and vegetables—crops more suitable to the terrain. Some results—

- Broiler production increased from 171,300 to 1,221,900 from 1955-59.
- Strawberry acreage went from one acre in Watauga County in 1954 to 25 in 1961.
- In 1960, 28 farms set 77,500 Christmas trees for future off-season income.
- The committee is now experimenting with growing blueberries for a good potential market.
- Number and quality of cattle have increased enough to warrant holding yearling steer and feeder calf sales.

Other Benefits

The development program has had many other effects. Some examples—

- Vocational guidance is now furnished to 75 percent of youth in school.
- People have built many more new homes.
- A new spirit of cooperation prevails between city and farm people.
- The homemaking committee has encouraged better nutrition, better sanitation in homes, inoculation against polio and other diseases.
- Needy families received surplus food.
- An educational program resulted in 125 older farm people becoming qualified for Old Age and Survivors Insurance payments.

Watauga citizens have no illusions that they've solved all their problems. But as Chairman Adams explains, the change in attitude is the important thing. People have found they can accomplish more by working together and co-operating with each other.

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Working Together - for new prosperity

Your Community Can Benefit

Is your community as prosperous, healthful, and convenient as you'd like it to be? If not, it might benefit by taking part in the new, nationwide Rural Areas Development Program.

Many Federal programs of technical and financial assistance can help your community build a stronger economy. Some of the more important are: loans and technical aid for expanding small business, loans for electrical equipment on farms and in factories, long-term credit to build and improve rural housing, urban renewal in small towns serving rural areas, land-reclamation, small watershed development, improvement of health and sanitary facilities, employment service, and industrial development.

Your County Agent, Farmers Home Administration supervisor, Rural Electrification Administration field representative, and other USDA agency personnel have more details on how the Rural Areas Development program can benefit your community. Contact your county agent on how your area can organize for action and take advantage of the assistance available under this program.